

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
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**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT FERDINAND R. MARCOS JR. AT THE CEREMONIAL SIGNING
OF THE AMENDMENTS TO THE AGRICULTURAL TARIFFICATION ACT, VALUE-ADDED
TAX REFUND FOR NON-RESIDENT TOURISTS, AND BASIC EDUCATION MENTAL
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING PROMOTION ACT**

[Delivered at the Ceremonial Hall, Malacañan Palace in Manila | 09 December 2024]

Thank you, Executive Secretary Chief Luc Bersamin for your kind introduction. *[Please take your seats.]*

Senate President, Senate President Chiz Escudero; the members of the Senate; Speaker Martin Romualdez and the members of the House of Representatives here today; the members of the Cabinet who are present with us; farmers organizations, groups and workers in the tourism industry and guidance counselors and student organizations; fellow workers in government; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

Today, we are here to talk about three measures that have the power to reshape our economy, improve the welfare of our farmers, and ensure the mental and physical health of our young Filipinos.

The Act Amending the Agricultural Tariffication Act and the Value-Added Tax Refund for Non-Resident Tourists Act are designed to unlock the full potential of our agriculture and tourism sectors, while the Basic Education Mental Health and Well-Being Promotion Act prioritize the mental health and well-being of our learners, the future drivers of our country's growth.

Before anything else, I would like to express once again my gratitude to those behind the timely passage of these three important laws—our legislators.

On the Amendment of the Agricultural Tariffication Act, agriculture has long been the backbone of our economy, nourishing millions of Filipinos and providing livelihoods to countless communities. While it has faced challenges—such as the need for modernization and improved infrastructure—these obstacles also present valuable opportunities to innovate, to grow, and to build a more resilient future for our families and for the country.

In 2019, we introduced the Rice Tariffication Law, removing import restrictions on rice and replacing them with a tariff system. This aimed to make our local farmers more competitive and sustainable through, amongst others, the creation of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund or what we refer to now as RCEF.

Through the RCEF, we have been able to invest in high-quality seeds, mechanization, and training of our farmers—ensuring that they are equipped with the right skills and tools to increase productivity.

With the expiration of the original six-year plan for RCEF fast approaching, it became clear that we needed to extend and strengthen the program. And this is where this law comes in, extending the program to 2031, and significantly increasing its funding from the original P10 billion to P30 billion annually. This will enable us to do much more for our farmers, ensuring that they have the resources that they need to succeed and to make the rice industry even more competitive.

As part of this law, the Seed Program and the Mechanization Program will receive enhanced support to provide more farmers with access to high-quality seeds, which will boost their yields.

The law also places significant emphasis on reducing post-harvest losses. By preventing up to 375,000 tons of milled rice from being wasted annually, we can help feed an additional 3.4 million Filipinos each year for the next six years—improving food security and making rice more accessible to everyone.

Furthermore, this law also empowers the DA to maintain stricter oversight of the rice industry. This ensures that the rice reaching our markets have complied with quality standards and regulations. The Bureau of Plant Industry will also be able to inspect rice warehouses and manage a national database to track grain storage, safeguarding our food supply and ensuring its safety for the public.

In cases of sudden rice shortages or price hikes, the DA will now be empowered to take the necessary actions to stabilize the market. This will help ensure that the price of rice remains affordable and accessible to every Filipino.

Above all, this law empowers our farmers to thrive and to help our country secure a stable food supply. By increasing investments in agriculture, providing more resources, and creating a more competitive rice industry, we are laying the groundwork for a stronger, more self-sufficient Philippines.

Now, as we move from the fields to the bustling streets and markets, let us turn our attention to another key driver of our economy: tourism.

It is no secret that shopping has become an essential part of the travel experience, and we are poised to capitalize on that momentum.

In 2023, the Philippine tourism sector played an instrumental role in our nation's economic recovery, contributing an impressive 8.6 percent to the GDP. Within this significant share, shopping emerged as the second largest expenditure for inbound tourists.

With this in mind, we are introducing the VAT refund program for non-resident tourists—designed not only to stimulate more spending but to promote the Philippines as a premier global shopping destination.

Under this program, tourists can claim a refund on the VAT for goods personally purchased at accredited retail outlets, provided these goods are taken out of the country within 60 days and meet a minimum transaction requirement of P3,000.

This initiative opens a new chapter in our tourism landscape, allowing the country to compete with other tourism markets that attract tourists who are eager to take home authentic, high-quality Filipino products.

Former UNWTO Secretary-General Taleb Rifai once said, “Shopping has converted into a determinant factor affecting destination choice, an important component of the overall travel experience and, in some cases the prime travel motivation.” These words resonate deeply with our goals.

The Philippines has long been a home for unique, handcrafted items, and this VAT refund program will help put a spotlight to our rich, local offerings.

Our signature products such as the Marikina shoes, the intricate handwoven textiles from the northern provinces, [and] the timeless craftsmanship of Filipino barongs all stand to benefit from this measure. These products tell our stories, and now, with the VAT refund, they will be able to be more accessible to global consumers, elevating once again our stature in the global market.

The economic impact of this measure is projected to be substantial, estimating an almost 30 percent increase in tourist spending. This surge will benefit both large-scale industries and micro, small, and medium enterprises—an important pillar of our local economy.

Tourists who have a positive shopping experience are more likely to return—with their friends and their families— supporting our goal to become a premier shopping destination in Southeast Asia.

As we move forward, I urge the Department of Finance and the Bureau of Internal Revenue to craft implementing rules and regulations that will make this VAT refund process simple, accessible, and culturally inclusive.

Just as we invest in infrastructure, tourism, and local businesses, we must also invest in the well-being of those who shape our future—the learners and the teaching and non-teaching personnel who mold them.

The Basic Education Mental Health and Well-Being Promotion Act addresses the often overlooked but vital aspect of mental health in schools. It ensures that our learners and school personnel are emotionally and mentally equipped to excel, even in the face of these modern challenges.

The need for this legislation is urgent and undeniable. Globally, mental health concerns are escalating. In the Philippines, the statistics are alarming.

Seventeen percent of our young people have contemplated taking their life, yet less than one percent sought professional help. This law aims to bridge that gap by embedding mental health services directly into our schools—our nation’s first line of defense against mental health issues.

Through this Act, schools will become sanctuaries of learning and of well-being. Care centers staffed by trained professionals will provide counseling and stress management workshops, and implement programs to reduce stigma around mental health. Teaching and non-teaching personnel will have access to resources that empower them to support students while safeguarding their own well-being.

When our learners and school personnel are mentally healthy, academic performance improves, absenteeism decreases, and a culture of compassion and understanding flourishes. Beyond being a safeguard to our youth and school personnel, this law is also an investment in the intellectual, emotional, and social future and development of our nation.

Let us also not underestimate the economic and social costs of neglecting mental health. Globally, mental health challenges could cost 16 trillion in losses by 2030. Locally, the toll is evident in decreased academic outcomes, burnout, and turnover rates among students and school personnel. This Act will help in reducing such losses, making our students more productive and ready to contribute to nation building.

Today, we renew our promise to every Filipino: that they will not only succeed academically but thrive holistically. Together, we envision a Philippines where mental health is prioritized alongside education, fostering a generation equipped to lead with resilience, compassion, and with purpose.

I call on each of you to support and drive these initiatives forward. Let us safeguard and empower our farmers, uplift our tourism industry, and provide mental health support.

Together, let us create a future where every Filipino has the opportunity to succeed, to live a balanced life, to contribute to the collective prosperity of the nation.

To this end, these three laws are not just policies—they are commitments. Commitments to the Filipino farmer, commitment to the Filipino worker, the Filipino entrepreneur, the Filipino learner, and to every single citizen who dreams of a brighter, more resilient, and more progressive *Bagong Pilipinas*.

Maraming salamat at mabuhay kayong lahat!

Mabuhay ang Bagong Pilipinas!

Magandang umaga sa inyo. [applause]

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